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UNCLAS VIENNA 001924

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EUR/AGS AND EUR/OHI

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KNAR PHUM PGOV AU

SUBJECT: AUSTRIA: PARTIES PREVENT KAMPL FROM ASSUMING
CHAIR OF UPPER HOUSE

REF: VIENNA 1484

THIS MESSAGE IS SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED.

¶1. (SBU) On June 8, all parties in Austria's parliament agreed on a strategy to prevent a controversial nationalist from becoming president of the Upper House as of July 1. The deputy, Siegfried Kampl, unleashed a storm of protest in April when he complained of "brutal persecution" of Nazis after World War II. At first, Kampl agreed to resign his seat, but he later retracted the offer. As a result, a constitutional amendment became necessary in order to avoid the spectacle of Kampl wielding the gavel in one of Parliament's two chambers. With the backing of all parties, the amendment passed the Lower House unanimously, with just one abstention.

¶2. (SBU) The Upper House will have to approve the law, which will then go to President Heinz Fischer on June 26. Fischer has already announced he will sign it. The constitutional change will allow state legislatures to change the rank-order of their deputies to the Upper House. This ranking determines who will assume the presidency of the chamber (which rotates among the states every half year). At its next session from June 28-30, the Carinthian state legislature will move another deputy to first position above Kampl, enabling him, rather than Kampl, to preside over the Upper House starting July 1.

¶3. (SBU) Another nationalist figure in the Upper House, John Gudenus, added fuel to the fire by amplifying on his previous comments questioning the existence of Nazi gas chambers. Gudenus specified that there had been "no gas chambers in the Third Reich, but in Poland." The Public Prosecutor's office subsequently began a new criminal investigation against Gudenus for violation of Austrian laws prohibiting Holocaust denial.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: Kampl and Gudenus's statements were broadly unacceptable in Austria, even among members of the right-wing Freedom Party (FPO) and the Alliance Future Austria (BZO). Their refusal to recant raised a storm of public protest from across the political spectrum, which forced the two deputies to resign their party memberships and leave the combined FPO-BZO parliamentary caucus. The entire political leadership of Austria called for them also to surrender their mandates as members of the Upper House -- which they so far have refused to do. However, should he refuse to step down voluntarily, Gudenus will lose his seat in the Upper House after Vienna state elections in fall 2005. It is clear his party will not renominate him.

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